

“Witnessing the Glory of God”  
TRANSFIGURATION 2017

Fr. Jim Plough  
8/5/2017  
4:00 pm

The story of the Transfiguration experience appears in all three synoptic gospels. The church assigns each one to the Second Sunday in Lent in cycles A, B, and C. The fourth Mystery of Light in the Rosary is that of the Transfiguration. Then comes our feast today, celebrated on August 6 each year. Without question, the church wants all of us to attend to the meaning of this feast.

Jesus’ apostles come to have a mystical experience, a privileged consciousness of the divine presence, a revelation of Jesus in his glory. Today’s readings preceding the gospel stand in support of that reality.

First, Daniel’s mystical experience: “I saw One like a Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven....He received dominion, glory, and kingship....His is an everlasting dominion that shall not be taken away, his kingship shall not be destroyed (Daniel 7).”

Peter affirms: “We ourselves heard the voice from heaven while we were with him on the holy mountain....We possess the prophetic message that is altogether reliable ( 2 Peter 1).” Opponents had charged that this teaching was all a myth. Peter insists: No, we saw it ourselves. The prophetic message is that Jesus will come again in his glory, at the Parousia, his second coming. Peter asks his listeners to be attentive to this message. “It is like a lamp shining in a dark place, until day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.” For us, too, the Transfiguration is meant to be like a lamp shining in a dark place, until day dawns and the morning star arises in our hearts.

Quite simply, the Transfiguration celebrates a mystical experience. Mysticism comes from mystery. Mysticism is the full, conscious participation in the Christian mysteries: life in Christ. The history of mysticism describes those kinds of

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experiences in the lives of Christians throughout the centuries. A Catholic professor at the University of Chicago, Bernard McGinn, has written six volumes on the history of mysticism and he is not finished yet! For some, mysticism relates to very exceptional people, a tiny minority, like John of the Cross and Theresa of Avila. Twentieth-century theologians are more inclined to regard mysticism as a phenomenon in everyday life. So for Karl Rahner, noted Jesuit scholar a generation ago. Thomas Merton believed that everyone is called to a life of deep contemplative prayer. Remember that mysticism fundamentally is a consciousness of the divine presence. We are all meant to have that consciousness, that sense that we are not alone. God stands with us and for us always. Are we aware of that?

Marcus Borg, a well-known Scripture scholar, tells of how he grew up in a traditional Lutheran family. In his college years, he grew apart from that faith, became an agnostic and even at times an atheist. He came to experience a conversion, coming to know Jesus again – as though for the first time. He really came to know him, as he says, through mystical experiences. I knew nothing about mysticism, he says. “It had not been part of four years of undergraduate and five years of graduate study in religion.”

“I became aware not just intellectually but experientially of the connectedness of everything. I ‘saw’ the connectedness, experienced it. As I returned to having a living faith in Jesus, I experienced those moments occasionally. Some were just as vivid, others were more glimmerings. Most were visual. A few were triggered by music – a chamber orchestra in a college chapel, a symphony orchestra in a concert hall. Then in my mid-fifties, I had the longest and most intense such experience I’ve ever had. It happened an hour or two into a flight from Tel Aviv to New York. Suddenly, the light changed. It became golden. I looked around, and everything was filled with exquisite beauty – the texture and fabric on the back of the seat in front of me, the tray full of food when it arrived (which I did not eat.) Everybody looked beautiful – even a passenger who, as we left Tel Aviv, had struck me as perhaps the ugliest person I had even seen. Even he looked wondrous. Everything was glorious, filled with glory. Was the experience of Jesus’ apostles like this?

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William James’ classic book, ‘The Varieties of Religious Experience,’ published more than a century ago, is still in print. It was named the second most important nonfiction book published in English in the twentieth century. The book is about mystical experiences throughout the centuries. Borg spoke of his mystical experiences in these words: “For the first time in my life, I understood the affirmation that the earth is full of the ‘glory’ of God.”

How many of you have had an experience like that? I don’t lay claim to having mystical experiences, but there have been times – singing in a four-part liturgical choir in my seminary days, -- when I was moved to sense the connectedness of everything. There have been times when hospital patients have helped me to realize that there is more to life than appears on the surface. Their keenly-focused demeanor – sparkling eyes and tight grasp of my hand – provide an experience I can never forget. Many of you know of my favorite time of the day – morning walks around a delightful pond in my neighborhood from six o’clock until seven – sunrise time! In the towering clusters of brilliantly lighted cloud forms in all shapes and sizes and in landscapes emerging into the light of day through changing hues and colors, I sense I am witnessing the glory of God.

Share with your family or a friend something of your own experiences that relate to today’s Scriptures. Those revelations will help to confirm your faith and offer needed encouragement to others.